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SUBJECT: Animism in Senegal

11. SUMMARY: During a trip to the Kedougou Region of southern Senegal, Poloff visited the Bedik village of Ewol whose people still practice a nature based form of animism and who have long resisted conversion to Islam or Christianity. While it is difficult to estimate how many true animists remain in Senegal, the highest concentrations are in the remote south of the country far from the reach of colonizers and proselytizers. End Summary.

History

12. Perched atop a 1400-foot mountain between two verdant valleys, Ewol has been occupied on and off since the 12th century after the Bedik escaped from Mali when the King of Guinea, Alpha Yahya, tried to convert them to Islam. Upon refusing to do so, a great many Bediks were massacred and those who escaped turned to living in caves within that area to flee another scourge - slavery. According to local legend, which was related to us by "Jean-Baptiste" who is the village's self-styled Catholic priest, school director, teacher, guide, and pharmacist, eighteen young men were singled out to be sacrificed to the traditional spirit that they worship. However, the devil spirit spared the young men and instead sent a swarm of bees which attacked the invading armies, killed the Guinean king, and spared them from slavery. According to Jean-Baptiste, this spirit continues to live in a giant Kapok tree that dominates the upper part of the village.

The Four Families

13. There are four large families that control life in the village whose total population is 532 souls. According to Jean-Baptiste, each family is responsible for a distinct role within the social structure of the group. For example the Camara family is in charge of keeping the animist tradition of the village alive. These traditions include a long and complex initiation ritual that each male must undergo when he reaches the age of fifteen. They are first circumcised and then they have to walk to a sacred forest 25 miles from the village. There they undergo training lasting five months where they learn how to work, hunt, till the soil, and kill birds, monkeys, gazelles, and goats. The successful completion of this training ushers the young men into adulthood. "That's about it," says Professor Thiaw, a renowned author and researcher on traditional religions. "Initiation and funereal rites are core precepts of animism. The idea is to connect with nature. A central theme of animism is the belief in the power of trees, crossroads, and nature in general. Animists believe that God gave all things a spirit and that those spirits can be discovered and harnessed, hence the veneration of trees and their life force."

14. In the center of Ewol stands a massive baobab tree where the villagers hold their annual sacrifices. The tree is also where, in the past, leading elders were buried and where it is believed that their spirits still reside. However, despite its remoteness, Ewol is not immune to influences from the outside world. Jean-Baptiste informed us that they were visited by French missionaries in 1953 and that some villagers converted to Catholicism. The village thus has a small church for a congregation of thirty-six Christians.

Animism and African Culture

15. "In fact, everyone in Senegal is an animist of sorts" continued professor Thiaw. "In Senegal, people took from Islam what they needed and integrated it into the syncretic form we have today. Hence, many of the rituals that we see today in Senegalese Islam have their roots firmly in animism or African culture. Take, for example, the veneration of the tomb of the deceased that is so prevalent among the brotherhoods. This is forbidden in Islam, but in Senegal all the brotherhoods venerate their deceased marabouts. This comes from a Serer animist ritual called "Pangool". Professor Thiaw says that, while it is very difficult to put a number to just how many animists are in Senegal, he acknowledges that it is more prevalent in southern Senegal citing the Bediks, the Bassari, and some Serers as modern-day practitioners. He also believes that Islam and Christianity destroyed basic African culture by demonizing many of the pastoral/animist rites that had been developed over the centuries. He posits that more and more countries in the region are re-affirming these old beliefs because there is an understanding that, by dismissing animism they are rejecting their own cultural heritage. "In some respects modern religions imprison man within certain boundaries always giving God the final decision. For animists, the process of boundless discovery is the gift from God."

Comment

16. The persistence of animism in Senegalese culture through its integration into everyday mainstream religious rituals shows that, despite many efforts, it remains a potent force in the national

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psyche. As professor Thiaw points out, animism may experience a possible revival as people begin to believe that animism is sometimes less about magic and mystique forces, but more about practical practices such as rituals to rid fields of crickets as performed by farmers wanting a bountiful harvest.
Smith